



## NEWSROOM

# TNC and Partners Protect Biodiverse Rafter T Ranch

Five thousand acre ranch connects corridor of essential lands and waters

May 19, 2020 | Orlando, Florida

## MEDIA CONTACTS



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The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and partners announce the protection of the critical and diverse landscapes of Rafter T Ranch, a working cattle ranch of more than five thousand acres located along the eastern edge of the Lake Wales Ridge in Sebring.

This region of Central Florida is part of the [Everglades](#) watershed, containing some of the oldest natural habitats and most biodiverse lands in the state, and is critical to [water supply](#) to the Everglades and aquifer. Home to imperiled and iconic plants and wildlife including

the [Florida panther](#), Florida [black bear](#), bald eagle, swallow-tailed kite, Florida scrub-jay, southern fox squirrel, and roseate spoonbill, Rafter T Ranch connects to large tracts of protected lands to form a contiguous natural corridor in Highlands County.

For nearly a decade, TNC has spearheaded a joint effort to safeguard the ranch from the pressure of potential development and preserve the ranch's role as part of the connected corridor of essential lands that benefit wildlife and support water flow and storage. The property is bordered to the east by Arbuckle Creek, which flows southward to the 28,000 acre Lake Istokpoga. With conservation easements on the ranch now in place to protect nearly the entire property, ranching operations will continue while development is prohibited in perpetuity.

The ranch has engaged in land management practices, water conservation projects, and habitat restoration efforts over the years and is among several critical conservation lands owned, protected, or managed by TNC in and around the region, including TNC's [Disney Wilderness Preserve](#) in Kissimmee, [Tiger Creek Preserve](#) in Babson Park, Saddle Blanket Scrub Preserve in Frostproof, and Venus Flatwoods Preserve in Venus.

See area map below and additional photos.

“The protection of lands such as Rafter T Ranch highlights the value of collaboration between governmental, non-governmental organizations and private landowners to achieve conservation on a meaningful scale,” said Temperince Morgan, executive director, The Nature Conservancy in Florida. “Ranchers and farmers can be great stewards of the land while maintaining their livelihoods, as the Wohl’s have demonstrated, and we can do so much more when we work together towards one common goal.”

The successful conservation is due to the strong collaboration and financial support of local, state and federal agencies including the U.S. Department of Defense's (DoD) [Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program \(REPI\)](#), U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) [Natural Resources Conservation Service \(NRCS\) Regional Conservation Partnership Program \(RCPP\)](#) Agricultural Land Easements (ALE), U.S. Air Force, [Enterprise Florida](#), [Central Florida Regional Planning Council](#), [U.S. Endowment for](#)



Forestry and Communities, Highlands County, and the Rafter T Ranch family led by Jimmy Wohl, committed to preserving the land for future generations.

"There is no single group of citizens more concerned with the future of our water and natural resources than farmers and ranchers. As cattle ranchers, we provide aquifer recharge, open green spaces, wildlife corridors and natural water filtration to help the local ecosystem," said Jimmy Wohl, owner of Rafter T Ranch. "While these processes were taken for granted when Florida's population was 2.7 million in 1950, they are now most precious with a current population approaching 22 million and growing daily."



**RAFTER T RANCH** This protected land is a working cattle ranch. © Wendy Mathews/TNC

The protection of Rafter T Ranch advances the collective conservation effort designated by the [Avon Park Air Force Range \(APAFR\) Sentinel Landscape](#) in which the property is located. Known for rich biodiversity and an abundance of private ranches within the

Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area, the 1.7 million acres is an area of high priority for improvement of water quality, quantity and storage capacity, outdoor recreation and education.

One of only seven Sentinel Landscapes Partnerships created by the USDA, DoD, and Department of the Interior (DOI) across the country, the program engages federal, state, and local governments, NGOs and private landowners, including those who helped conserve Rafter T, to work together to protect, manage, and restore nature at a landscape scale while also benefitting military readiness.

“The Avon Park Air Force Range Sentinel Landscape Partnership streamlines land protection efforts while leveraging available funding in support of agriculture, conservation, and military readiness. These efforts contribute to Florida’s economy, Everglades restoration, and National defense by sustaining agriculture, providing clean water, improving habitat connectivity, and ensuring military training can continue,” said Chad Allison, Sentinel Landscape Partnership Coordinator, Central Florida Regional Planning Council.

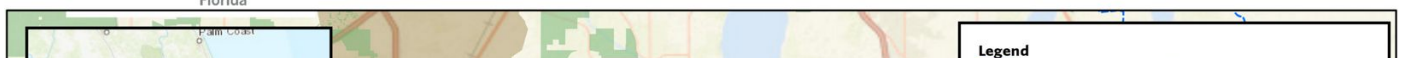
The protection of Rafter T marks a first time alignment between the DoD’s REPI and NRCS’ ALE programs. Requirements, goals, and funds of each agency were combined to achieve the same conservation endeavor, resulting in outcomes that met needs for both agencies—conservation of agricultural land and water resources and strengthening the Air Force mission by protecting land around the high value military testing and training area.

“This partnership demonstrates what can be accomplished on a landscape scale through voluntary, private lands conservation. The project can be used as a model for agencies and organization to expand conservation and leverage funding to accomplish effective solutions,” said Rafael Vega, Florida State Conservationist (acting) for USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service.

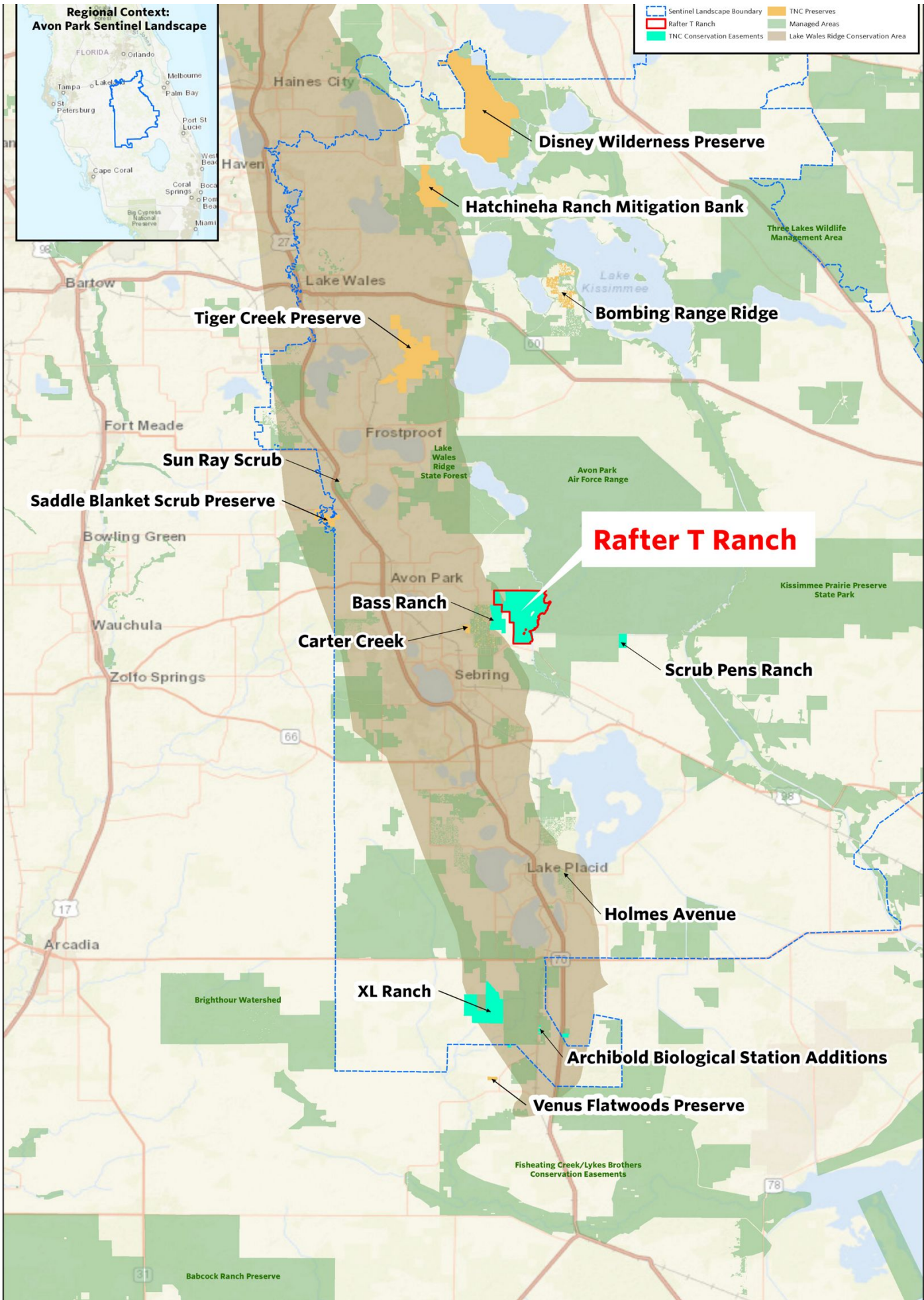
See map of area below or [download](#).



**Conservation of Rafter T Ranch  
Within the Avon Park Sentinel Landscape**









**RAFTER T RANCH** Area Map © TNC

## EXPLORE RAFTER T RANCH



**RAFTER T RANCH** Pine flatwoods over a saw palmetto-wiregrass understory. © Wendy Mathews/T

The Nature Conservancy is a global conservation organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Guided by science, we



create innovative, on-the-ground solutions to our world's toughest challenges so that nature and people can thrive together. We are tackling climate change, conserving lands, waters and oceans at an unprecedented scale, providing food and water sustainably and helping make cities more sustainable. Working in 79 countries and territories, we use a collaborative approach that engages local communities, governments, the private sector, and other partners. To learn more, visit [www.nature.org](http://www.nature.org) or follow [@nature\\_press](https://twitter.com/nature_press) on Twitter.

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### CONSERVATION UPDATE

## Protecting the Everglades

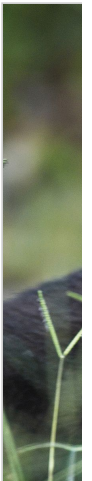
Few American landscapes are as impressive as the Everglades, and none as iconic to Florida. The Everglades' health resonates far beyond our state.



### CONSERVATION UPDATE

## Save the Florida Panther

The Nature Conservancy has led efforts that protect thousands of acres of prime panther habitat and corridors that link those places.



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